

Rise Up  
Matthew 13:31-35  
June 25, 2006  
Kory Wilcoxson

Today we celebrate two significant events in the life of the church: our successful VBS program, and our summer mission trip. Now, you may think these two events don't have a lot to do with each other. One was focused on fun and play and education, the other focused on work and mission and service.

And yet, God works in mysterious ways. Each day VBS opened with a skit to help the kids see the lessons about God's love in action. The setting this year was Son Treasure Island. And wouldn't you know it? On day 3, the characters in the skit were cleaning up after a big storm hit the island.

That's what the 14 youth and 8 adults headed to New Orleans will be doing: cleaning up. But this will be more than some light sweeping and trash pickup. In fact, we won't be cleaning up as much as we'll be cleaning out. Our task will be to gut homes, taking out all the water-soaked furniture and carpet and drywall. In essence, we'll be handed a hammer and crowbar and told to "go at it!" I told the volunteer coordinator down there that if there's one thing our group does well, it's destruction!

I would hope that 22 people working 8 hours a day for 5 days would get a lot of work done, but I have a feeling we're going to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the destruction when we get down there. I remember the night before Katrina was supposed to hit land, the TV reported that 80% of the homes in New Orleans would be destroyed. And I remember thinking, "That can't be right! How can that many homes be destroyed by one storm?" And then I saw the pictures of the aftermath. I've been told by several people that the pictures on TV don't begin to tell the story.

So I think that once we get down there and see firsthand what's happened, we might get a bit discouraged. We could begin to think, "What can we do in the face of total devastation? How can one more gutted house matter when 80% of the whole area has been destroyed? We've got 14 junior and senior high students, one college student, 3 teachers, 1 professor, 2 ministers, and a mechanic. Hardly a calloused hand or a pair of workboots in the bunch. Can we really make a difference?"

I believe Jesus was speaking to us when he said these two parables in today's reading. Tim talked about the mustard seed parable last week, so I want to focus on the other one, the one about the yeast and the bread. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast, that when added to a large portion of flour, mixes its way all through the dough, causing it to rise during baking.

Do you know how yeast works? It's actually a living plant. One source I found called it a fungi, but I don't like to think of having fungi in my bread, so we'll call it a plant. The yeast eats actually the sugars in the other ingredients, and expels carbon dioxide. These gas bubbles are what cause the dough to rise, and create the pockets of air in the bread that give it a light, airy texture.

Leigh and I were given a breadmaker when we were married. We've had that breadmaker now for nine years; it was probably used for three weeks. But for the first three weeks of our marriage, we had some good homemade bread! I remember putting the ingredients together: first I put in the water, then the butter, then flour and sugar and

dry milk. The last thing to go in was the yeast, and I had to be very careful that it didn't touch the water. I would make a little hole in the dry ingredients and add just a little yeast. Then, after a few hours of mixing and baking, we would have this wonderful loaf of bread. It was a great machine. Anyone interested in a slightly used 9-year-old breadmaker, see me after the service.

You wouldn't think that a thimbleful of yeast could have much effect on a 2-pound loaf of bread. You also wouldn't think that a popular rabble-rousing rabbi crucified like a common criminal would have much effect, either. But both the yeast and Jesus have one thing in common: to work, they have to rise up!

It is through the resurrection, through rising up, that Christ's power is made known. And the 22 of us going to New Orleans have committed to rising up and heading out in God's name. We're going to an area that has been flattened, not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually. We go to be yeast, to help raise the spirits of those we meet and for whom we work.

So we don't go for ourselves. I mean, really, who in their right mind would give up a week of their summer vacation to go to a hot, humid, sticky part of the country to sleep in a church gym on an air mattress and work tearing out drywall and old wet carpet? By the way, it's too late to back out now! Who does these sorts of things for themselves? What could we possibly gain from it?

We're not going down there to make a name for ourselves. Listen, we're a pretty good-looking group, if I do say so myself, but to be honest, who needs to see our face? On the other hand, who doesn't need to see God's face in New Orleans? We are going for this one simple reason: we are going to make God known. We are surrendering our hands and our feet to God's will, and asking God to use us to make Himself known.

This isn't always a glamorous goal. Being God's representative can actually be either kind of dangerous – ask any of the prophets – or, dare I say it, kind of boring. I remember on our first mission trip to Kansas City, on our first day one of the things we did was walk along a street picking up garbage. And I remember hearing a bit of grumbling that evening. We thought we were going to be building houses and making a difference, and we were relegated to picking up trash along the street.

But you know what? That trash had to be picked up by someone. It might as well have been us. Someone's got to hold the ladder so someone else can climb it. Someone's got to fetch more nails so they can be hammered. It's easy for us to assume that somebody else will do it. You've probably heard the story about the four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was an job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought that Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.

Somebody has to do the small things, because with enough people doing enough small things, big things get accomplished. So 20 of us leave this place today with a mission that calls us to New Orleans, to do a lot of small things together. We go to be the yeast, to provide pockets of air to a region that was literally drowned in devastation, to help an area to rise up after it's been knocked down. Can we really have much of an impact? Can we really make a difference? Ask the family whose house we'll be working

on. If we make a difference, even to only one family or one person, have we made the kingdom of God real to them?

We're not the only ones leaving today with a mission. The rest of you will also leave this place today with a mission that you will receive later. I pray you accept this mission. It may not seem like a big thing to you, but I promise you that it is. God will work through you to make great things happen. With your help we can make God known, not just in this church, but in New Orleans, and this world. But we can't do it sitting back, waiting for somebody else to do what we should be doing. Christ didn't accomplish anything by staying in the tomb. Like him, we have to rise up.